

Op-Ed (667 Words)

CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE CLEANUP PLAN FOR PORTLAND HARBOR

By Dennis McLerran

After more than 150 years of heavy industrial activity, explosive growth and world-changing innovations the Portland area is on the verge of a transformational effort to restore the river that drove so much of the region's economic success and cultural history.

Indeed, if it could be grown, processed, manufactured or repaired, it was going to get done along the Willamette. And that same "get it done" attitude was resurrected in the 60s and 70s when former Governor Tom McCall drove the fight to clean up the Willamette, which had caused public health authorities to ban people from its waters.

The Governor rallied public opinion and the state legislature to create the Department of Environmental Quality – and to give it teeth. Over time, the pollution insults slowed and by the 1980s, water quality improvement in the Willamette was heralded as one of the great success stories of the nascent environmental movement.

Despite these efforts, decades of heavy industrial use and the millions of people living in the watershed continued to pollute the river. Today, the bottom and banks of the Lower Willamette within Portland Harbor remain contaminated with heavy metals, PCBs, hydrocarbons, dioxins, and pesticides.

In some areas of Portland Harbor resident fish and shellfish aren't safe to eat, and direct contact with sediment can pose a risk to people. Despite health agency warnings, people continue to eat fish and shellfish from the river, putting themselves and their families at risk.

Clearly, the most concentrated, persistent and toxic pollutants must be cleaned up to levels that reduce the risk to people -- and the EPA and the DEQ are working with responsible parties to do exactly that.

Contaminated sediment cleanups like Portland's Lower Willamette -- which encompasses the most contaminated parts of the river from the Columbia Slough to just below the Broadway Bridge -- are big and complicated, and require agencies, citizens and industries to work together to address the problems. That process is often complex, time-consuming and a little contentious.

The EPA's goal is to develop a plan that will mirror Portlanders' vision for a cleaner, healthier working waterfront – one that will target the most dangerous sources of pollution, that will be technically feasible, and that will be affordable.

The “conceptual remedy” we’ve developed represents a first cut at such a plan. It prescribes removing the worst pollution from the river bottom and from upland sources, capping other areas with clean sand, and enhanced natural processes to clean up the majority of the remaining river bottom.

It bears repeating that this is a working draft, not the final plan.

As we receive input from stakeholder groups reviewing this conceptual plan, we will continue to refine our approach on a number of key issues and aspects of this draft to ensure the best result for all involved.

We will review this “conceptual” cleanup plan with the Community Advisory Group, natural resource trustees, state, tribes, and the Lower Willamette Group, and then subject that plan to scrutiny from our national experts. By spring, we ought to have a much-revised, draft plan ready for public view and comment. And by that time we should have a better sense of the costs associated with that draft plan.

We will provide many opportunities next spring for the public to be involved in the cleanup and urge all Portlanders to find a way to participate that fits their interest and hectic schedule. We hope they see the time spent as a good investment in helping guide and shape the long-term cleanup of the majestic Willamette River.

Over the past several decades the people of City of Portland and the State of Oregon have invested a great deal in the Willamette, recognizing its historic value as the Region’s economic and cultural engine. We see the work ahead as not only safeguarding these past investments, but instrumental in delivering a cleaner, healthier river for everyone who lives, works and plays on the Willamette. We owe that to future generations of Portlanders.

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